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ABSTRACT

This paper presents highlights from surveys of some of Canada's most isolated schools, located in northern Labrador, Nunavut, northern Saskatchewan, and northern and interior British Columbia. Most served Inuit or other First Nations communities. Although all schools had contact by phone and most had e-mail, few were accessible by road. Five Inuit schools in Labrador were examined. These schools had strong links to their communities and were among the most academically successful schools seen. Reasons for success included support and advocacy by Inuit political and health organizations and an unusual history--early Moravian missionaries respected Native culture and promoted Native language literacy. Three Nunavut schools were influenced by arctic weather conditions and local hunting and fishing seasons. Primary grades were taught in the Native language. Positive aspects of schools were community connections and cultural programs, but problems included lack of space, high dropout rate, lack of Inuit instructors, and staff turnover. Six Saskatchewan schools were also affected by the weather. Positive factors included community support, dedicated teachers, and student success in mastering computer and Internet technology. Problems included staff turnover, political interference, community substance abuse, high rates of fetal alcohol syndrome, and lack of special programs. The two British Columbia schools were very small. They had had success with technology but suffered from lack of resources, staff turnover, dysfunctional families, and special education needs. Substance abuse and child abuse problems in one isolated village are discussed. (SV)

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CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN CANADA'S ISOLATED SCHOOLS

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CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN CANADA'S ISOLATED SCHOOLS

Introduction

For some time now, the Society for the Preservation of Education in the Rural Schools of Australia (SPERA) has been publishing journal articles describing experiences and issues in some of the country's isolated schools. These articles attracted my attention since I had spent a year in the National Centre for Research on Rural Education (NCRRE) in Perth, Western Australia where I first became aware of such schools. About a year ago, I had a conversation with a graduate student from Nunavut who taught in an isolated school... perhaps the most isolated school in Canada. My interest was rekindled. I searched the internet for information but found only data relating to schools outside of Canada. Consequently, I have been most interested to find that the topic is being addressed at this conference in a presentation by Rosemary Foster, Tim Goddard, Amy Burns and Jeff Finell (Session 14 on Friday morning). This paper presents highlights of a survey conducted last autumn of a number of isolated schools across Canada. From the many returns, the subsequent account addresses particular highlights from the surveys received from the most isolated schools.

Methodology

A Definition of Isolation . Isolated schools were located by addressing requests to Provincial/ Territorial Ministries of Education for both permission to contact schools and for names of schools which might be described as isolated. It soon became apparent that schools are isolated only to a certain degree. Every school had contact by phone and by fax. Most schools had an e-mail address. However , some schools had no contact by road. The schools in Nunavut were in communities that had air strips and also had access by water in two summer months. Some schools had trails that were passable by four wheel drive vehicles in summer and by snowmobiles in winter. The schools in Labrador were accessible only by water. A few schools in Saskatchewan were connected by roads which were passable only in the summer and early autumn.

A Definition of 'Culture' . I have chosen to use the rather simplistic definition of culture used by Patterson et al. (1986) who define it as "the way we do things around here."

The Sample. For the purpose of this paper, the schools from which data were obtained are located in Labrador, Nunavut, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. They are schools which are characterized by a high degree of isolation.

The Data. Information was secured through the use of a questionnaire, supplemented occasionally by a follow-up e-mail to, or telephone conversation with, the principals who responded to the questionnaire.

The Schools

Labrador. In his study of "Inuit Schools of Northern Labrador" Anderson

(2001) explores the general picture of five different schools, using the questionnaire that has been used in the other schools of this study. However, his exploration is broader and rich in detail. It is examined here in some detail because of a significant difference among some of the Inuit schools in Labrador and those in other parts of the country. The major difference lies in the way that many early Europeans treated the Inuit. In Labrador, German speaking Moravian missionaries were among the first people to become intimately involved with the Inuit. They set up communities with churches and schools. They showed a great deal of respect for the native culture. Anderson quotes Smallwood et al. (1991, p.62)

> The Moravian church began teaching the Inuit how to read and write (in their own language)...and provided translation of psalms, hymns and the New Testament for the benefit of their converts. The curriculum gradually expanded to include subjects such as arithmetic and geography, and some practical skills such as carpentry and making sealskin boots. By the nineteenth century most Inuit could read in their own language.

Anderson identifies Nuntak School (pseudonym) as one of the most successful Inuit schools. It has a strong academic orientation. Its graduation rate is 99% with a post secondary graduate rate of 50%. It has a strong link with its community and a stable staff. Common to all the isolated schools is the tendency for older students to join their elders for the spring caribou hunt. The school is struggling to help the community make a transition from a hunting and gathering lifestyle to one of common economic activities. It has become a centre for community life and the use of all its facilities is available on request.

The Inuit schools of Northern Labrador also have the support of the Labrador Inuit Association (LIA), Anderson (2001) notes that "the LIA as a political, cultural and economic developer has educational influence as it leads a bold transition towards self

government and greater control of its resources." He goes on to state that:

> The LIA as a political organization is seen as being involved in negotiating land claims, providing information sessions and general references to the needs of the Inuit. The LIA has an educational advisory which deals more directly with schools, universities, funding initiatives, special requests, and other education interests....The third influence is that of the Labrador Inuit Health Commission. This body addresses health education and related matters of the Inuit, as well as assisting the school with student referrals for assistance and supporting preschool programs. (2)

The early Moravian influence on maintaining culture and the ongoing concern of the LIA may be one reason why the schools of Northern Labrador differ from the other schools in this study. The culture of the school and the community is marked by a spirit of cooperation. The influence of the LIA helps to lessen the impact of social and geographical isolation.

However, it should be recognized that not all Labrador schools have such an excellent reputation . Communities with drug abuse programs, for example, have schools with abysmal track records.

Nunavut. Nunavut schools are the most northerly schools in Canada. They are geographically also the most isolated from each other. Like the Labrador schools, they depend to a large extent upon the short season of open water in order to receive supplies for the year. The major communication links with the 'outside' are by satellite, television , telephone, e-mail and internet,. There is regular delivery of newspapers. Each community has an air strip and most have a daily air link. One of the respondingschools stated that a small local air carrier was based in the community,

mainly for medical flights. Because most of the teachers come from the south,bringing heir children with them, there are small numbers of Caucasian children in each school.

The seasons have an impact upon school and community life. Between April and August, there are twenty-four hours of daylight. In December and January, there are twenty-four hours of darkness. In the high Arctic, the summer temperature rarely becomes warmer thăt 4C. In the southern Arctic, it may reach 20C. Winter temperatures drop to -45C with spells of even colder weather, accompanied by whiteouts and winds of up to 120 km/h. In spite of this, schools are rarely closed for more than a few days because of inclement weather conditions. On the other hand, during the long hours of daylight in May and June, students tend to stay up way past regular bedtimes and consequently are late to school. The light season is also the period for camping, hunting and fishing and many parents take their children out of school for these activities. Some schools compensate for this by beginning the school year in August and finishing at the end of May. Other schools extend the daily instructional time during the dark season and shorten the school year.

The three schools surveyed in Nunavut all felt that one of their strengths was their relationship with their school community which was enhanced by their attempts to make their programs culturally based. The smallest school, of only 45 students, offered a kindergarten to Grade 12 program. The first five grades were taught in first language. In a second school the first language was taught in Pre-school, Kindergarten and Grades 1 and 2. In the third school, a high school, no grade was taught in first language. The school is concerned about this but cites such negative factors as the lack of instructors, a similar lack of support for such programs and the absence of an

approved program.

In the smallest school, the lack of space for a program spanning thirteen grades is seen as a detriment to successful instruction. Students are spread through the classrooms, and into the hall. In the K-12 school, non -attenders and dropouts at the Senior High School level are seen as the least successful aspects of the school. When asked about this, the school replied that parents appeared to be unable to motivate students to go to school or don't see the value in them getting an education or jobs. As the principal declared, "They don't see the carrot at the end of it all. They lack motivation to complete school. They drop out because of pregnancy, or for short term jobs or even because they can't get up in the morning!" He went on to express the desperate need for a trained, educated counsellor, and for more Inuit staff.

The pattern of decision-making in the schools differed from school to school. In the smallest school, the Education Authority 's input was seen as important. Many parents in the community were school board members and had a great deal of influence.

In the K-12 and the High School, the influence of the Education Authority was perceived as perfunctory . The principal felt that his input was most important when decisions had to be made about the day to day operations of the school. In this task, decisions were made in consultation with the staff. Parents were seen as apathetic and did not respond to invitations to become involved, a possible reason being that there are so many other Boards and Committees on which they can serve. Student councils were seen as being involved to a degree.

There is an annual staff turnover in the smallest school of approximately 66 per cent. In the larger schools the turnover is in the 25-50 per cent range.

Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan's isolated schools are located in the northern part of the province. Six schools responded to this survey. Most of their students are First Nations or Metis. Caucasian students are in the minority, with only one school indicating the presence of a two digit percentage (24%) of those students. Two of the six schools are near roads. For the remainder, the major communications links are by telephone, satellite TV, internet and e-mail. Schools near roads have bi-weekly postal service; the others have regular air service.

Although they are not so far north as the Nunuvat schools, these schools also are affected by weather conditions. Summers may be short and may be hot as weather systems track in from the west. One school reported that the short summer season has led to an altered school year of 179 days, allowing families to take advantage of June as a holiday. Winters are marked by heavy snowfalls and temperatures dipping to -40C. Schools endeavour to remain open unless the cold weather causes pipes to freeze or the power goes out. However, some parents do not send their children to school when the weather is severe. Outdoor activities are curtailed. Attendance may also decline by 10 to 15 per cent in the long spring days when students stay up late at night and, consequently, are either late or miss mornings at school.

Two major perceptions emerged about the successful aspects of the schools. Half the schools felt that their involvement with the community was successful. As one principal noted, "We do a lot of community related activities where the students and the community gather for a purpose, often extra-curricular in nature or 'festival oriented.'

Another opinion was offered by the rest of the principals; they believed their schools

were offering good quality programs, developing a positive student attitude and work habits, and developing student expertise in the use of computer and internet technology.

Community support and dedicated teachers were identified as some of the reasons for success, but one principal also felt that the success that students quickly felt through mastering technology was also a factor.

When queried abut the least successful aspects of the school, principals gave several examples. One noted that academic excellence is a challenge for many students. Another noted the lack of special and physical education programs. A third expressed concern that it was difficult to prepare 14 and 15 year old students for leaving home and going off to high school in nearby cities. Others mentioned that power politics outside the school have an impact inside the school. As one principal elaborated, "Students in school mimic behaviour seen in the home and repeat what they hear. Petty jealousies and feuds in the community find their way into the school ."

Among the problems faced by the schools are low enrolments, (but one school is growing) rapid staff turnover (100% in one school!) political interference and infighting , drug and alcohol abuse and dysfunctional families. In one school, 70 % of the students suffer from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)[1] Not surprisingly, specialprovision isnecessary for the learning and physically disabled.

In general, the pattern of decision making in the schools was similar. All schools

[1] According to Asetoyer, (1990), Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is an irreversible birth defect that is most likely to occur when a pregnant woman abuses alcohol. A child with FAS is born mentally retarded with deformed facial features and some physical malformations. Fetal Alcohol Effected (FAE) which affects 1 in 50 native Americans, is a lesser degree of birth defect, with the effects being below average IQ, learning disabilities, hyperactivity, short attention span, and possibly the same physical

acknowledged the important role of the Education Authority in establishing curriculum and in providing policy, manuals and guidelines. They saw within these, certain allowances for local initiatives. In the school with a hundred per cent First Nations-Metis student population, parents were seen as being most important decision makers after the Education Authority. Students were not seen as involved. In the other schools, they were recognized as having some voice, albeit limited. In the same schools, parents who sat on local school boards or advisory councils were recognized as active in planning with their advice usually followed if it was legally permitted.

With one exception , already noted, there was approximately a 25-30% staff turnover ever y year.

British Columbia. At the time of writing this paper, I had received responses from only two British Columbia schools, both of which were independent schools. Both served only First Nations students. One school is located in the interior and has an enrolment of twelve students in classes ranging from Junior Kindergarten to Grade Nine. The second school is in the northwestern part of the province and has sixty-four students enrolled, also from Junior Kindergarten to Grade Nine. The schools have no road links although one school may be reached by using a four by four on a very rough trail. Access is also possible by plane or helicopter.

Unlike the other schools of this study, these schools report that they are little affected by weather conditions or by the seasons. As the major communication link

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malformation as FAS. FAE children are usually not detected until they manifest the same physical malformations as FAS children. (p.1)

is by air, heavy snowfalls may cause time delays. The schools are located in villages so even in the worst snowfall no none misses school since no students are bussed.

The smaller school has two classrooms, a computer room, a Preschool room for ages 2 to 5 where, in the afternoon, a language teacher (Carrier) works with the young ones in the afternoon. There is also a small gym for scheduled P.E. classes . The Computer room and the gym are also used by the community in the evenings. The larger school has ten classrooms. It also has a Learning Assistance Room, a Computer Lab, a Native Culture Room and a woodshop. The Computer Lab and the Woodshop are also used by the community. Both schools provide space for a community centre.

The smaller school sees its recent introduction of computers as one of its most successful aspects . Several homes have been motivated to buy their own computer systems for home study. The principal sees great value in the community communicating with the rest of the world by internet. He has helped set up a web site, whereby community artisans can sell their crafts. The principal of the larger school rates the high degree of staff professionalism and enthusiasm as one of the most successful aspects of the school. He also rates highly the school's computer learning centre, its home-school program and its companion reading program.

In discussing the least successful aspects of the smaller school, the principal wrote:

> Least successful aspects include teaching physical education as we have classes that are too small to offer many organized sports and the gym is too small for proper playing of basketball and badminton, to name two sports. and we lack 'a resource centre' permitting access to many teaching tools a larger school system offers. This means that we have to spend a fair bit of money for audio visual materials for example. We have no science lab, woodworking and metal work shops but do have the occasional cooking class in the office's kitchen. Most of all, we miss the energy that comes

from a larger student body.

Among the problems facing the school he identifies "dysfunctional families sending kids to class in emotional messes at times. ...typical problems plaguing other First Nation homes and villages/reserves." On a positive note, he notes that all classes are taught in the first language.

The principal of the larger school states that "student management, although improved significantly, still requires a great deal of energy and time." Part of the reason for this, he feels, can be attributed to the weak support from some parents and " a perception that schools should solve all 'educational' problems." As he sees it, three particular problems in his school are those of attracting and retaining quality teachers and administrators, student management, and improving community involvement..

Students in the smaller school are taught in the Carrier tongue and also taught English.No mention is made of programming for special students. In the larger school, there is no immersion program, just language classes. In that school, about 20 per cent of the students are provided with special education, the reason being that many suffer from Fetal Alcohol Effect (FAE) with its attendant problems while some need assistance with behaviour management. In that school, there is approximately a 70-100 per cent staff turnover every year. In both schools, a parent is a teaching assistant.

The smaller school is a Band operated private school. Educational decision making is done totally by the principal after consulting with the other teacher and the language teacher. If the issue is important, then the parents are involved. Students are often involved in decision making for as the principal says, "We are such a small school

that it is easy to include them." The larger school is bound by the policy of the Education Authority and the principal sees it as is duty to implement that policy. Teachers are consulted on all matters. Parents are made aware of policy and their opinions are solicited. However, their participation is very low. Students are consulted 'when practical. Occasionally, there are community meetings.

Discussion

Canada's isolated schools , without exception, appear to be physically located in northern, sparsely populated regions of the country. Moreover, the majority of their students are First Nations in origin, although a small number of schools serve Metis populations. All schools have inherited a culture clash as they face the reality of being dominated by the mainly European thought of non native educators whose ancestors claimed the country as their own. Too often, handouts and subsidies have exacerbated and hastened the decay of personal initiative among First Nations people.. Today, there appears to be a new movement to accord those people increasing amounts of self control over their lives. But generations have grown up having lost their self respect and having become slaves to drink and apathy. Schools, either band controlled or independent, fight the battles between mandated change and the reluctance and inability of their people to meet the mandate.

One of the major consequences of isolation is that people lack the stimulation of contact with people other than themselves . They turn inward and the status quo is reinforced. One of the principals who particiated in this study responded by e-mail which provided me with the opportunity to engage in an ongoing discussion of his situation. His school is located in a small isolated village in which a major problem is

that of broken families where not only does the father disappear but also the mother, leaving the aunts and grandmothers to be the caregivers of the children. The primary age group abandoned is the teenagers for it is perceived that they need the least guidance when in reality they need it the most to head off many abuse and teen pregancny problems. He reports that the odds are that almost every native girl, by 16 has been pregnant and is either caring for her child or given it up for adoption. Moreover, she has been raped and/or sexually molested multiple times by a close male relative. That does not include the other types of abuse heaped upon them. Similarly, little boys experience abuse in many other ways. Many native male elders seem to view the young as 'fair game' and no one, especially whites or cultural outsiders , has any right to interfere.

The main causes of abuse appear to be the taking of various substances such as drugs and liquor. Moreover, people suffer from a lack of self identity and a sense of hopelessness.. The sad irony of this is that the federal help of all sorts which is continually given to these communities is always just enough to help stop most of the natives from hitting the proverbial "bottom' which many counsellors believe is the point at which real healing can begin. Present federal programs appear to be simply bandages applied to the symptoms while ignoring the causes.

While these problems were not identified by all the schools in the isolated communities of this study, they were alluded to by a few. I intend to follow -up in this research by investigating some of the community issues that schools must be aware of as they try to instruct their students. The study indicates that some progress is being made but changing a deeply ingrained culture is a difficult and time consuming task.

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